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OBEDIENCE TO GOD
THE MEASURE OF HUMAN LIBERTY.

A
S E R M O N,
PREACHED AT THE
PARISH CHURCH OF BASINGSTOKE,

In the County of SOUTHAMPTON,
On the 26th of MAY, 1791,

AT THE
V I S I T A T I O N

OF THE
Rev. Dr. THOMAS BALGUY,
ARCHDEACON OF WINCHESTER;

And published at the Request of the ARCHDEACON, and the
CLERGY present.

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PREACHED AT

THE CHURCH OF ST. MARY, LONDON.

ON THE 25th OF SEPTEMBER.

By

WILLIAM

THE REV. JOHN THOMAS

OF THE CHURCH OF ST. MARY, LONDON.

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1st Epist. Gen. of St. Peter, Chap ii. and Ver. 16.

AS FREE, AND NOT USING YOUR LIBERTY FOR
A CLOKE OF MALICIOUSNESS, BUT AS THE
SERVANTS OF GOD.

THE Christian Religion, being calculated to lead mankind through a state of obedience and virtue in this world to an eternal state of reward and glory in the next, contains doctrines and precepts applicable to every rank and condition of life. The Apostles therefore, whose duty it was to recommend and enforce the observance of them, and rightly to divide the Word of Truth, after reminding their converts of the main and fundamental principles of the Gospel, have given them rules, arising out of those principles, for the regulation of their conduct in their respective situations.

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The Jews, who proudly valued themselves on account of the singular favours which their nation had experienced from God in the more happy times of their virtue and prosperity, were unwilling, in their dispersion among the Gentiles, to acknowledge any governor besides Jehovah; they accounted themselves free, and murmured against every exertion of the Heathen powers: nor indeed can we wonder that those, who had rejected the laws, and despised the gracious offers of their Redeemer, should withhold their obedience to any human authority. This restless and turbulent spirit often broke out in insurrections, and a total destruction of the peace of society; and the Jewish name was reproached, and abhorred.

To remedy these disorders, and prevent the like among the Christian converts scattered in various parts among the Gentiles, St. Peter exhorts them to remember the nature of the Religion they had professed, and the duty incumbent on them to abstain from the indulgence of every passion which might bring
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that Religion into contempt. He very justly extols the advantages of Christian liberty, but at the same time draws the line of it's boundary; shewing that the service which we owe to God must be the rule of Christian conduct at all times, and on all occasions. In the words of the text he implies that we are free; and then points out the nature of our liberty, by shewing first, wherein consists it's abuse, and secondly, wherein the true and just exercise of it is comprised :

“ As free, and not using your liberty for
 “ a cloke of malicioufness, but as the servants
 “ of God.”

The assertion implied in the former part of these words, with the caution which accompanies it, was written for the instruction of Christians in every age. It concerns Us as much as it did the converts to Christianity in the infancy of the Gospel: and the present state of mankind renders the subject worthy our most serious attention. I shall therefore endeavour to illustrate it, by considering,

B

1st,

1st, The Liberty which Man originally received from his Maker ; and

2dly, The nature of that Freedom which was proclaimed to mankind by the Gospel of Christ.

I shall then urge the doctrine of the Apostle, to regulate our notions and desires of Liberty as members of Society.

1. All other creatures inferior to Man are compelled to the observance of certain laws, within which their Creator has thought fit to confine them, and from which consequently it is not in their power to deviate. They move on in one regular course, without judgment or choice, without merit or demerit, fulfilling the purposes for which they were designed. But Man, who was created for higher ends, who was born to an * inheritance incorruptible and undefiled, reserved in Heaven for him, was endowed with more noble faculties, that he might aspire to so glorious a reward. He came out of his
Creator's

* i. Ep. Peter, chap. i. ver. 4.

Creator's hands, a being of free choice and action; and his God therefore gave him a positive law as the trial of his obedience. Without a freedom of will, and consequently a power of transgressing the law, there could have been nothing meritorious in the observance of it; no sort of title to the divine favour and recompence. To direct the will towards obedience, and to regulate the grosser part of his composition, no motive was wanting. The strength of reason, and all the most refined feelings of the heart, were on the side of innocence and virtue. Love, gratitude, hope, peace, and the voice of conscience, were powerful advocates for obedience. In aid to these motives, that nothing might be omitted to deter him from a violation of the law, no less a punishment than death was denounced in the day of his disobedience; so that, if the nobler passions should fail, Fear was at hand to try its powers, aggravated by the stings of remorse and horror. Thus at the same time that God created man free, He held out to him every
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incitement not to abuse his liberty. But notwithstanding these motives to obedience, notwithstanding the fear of so dreadful a punishment, the frailty of our first parents prevailed; they made a vicious use of their freedom, and, yielding to the suggestions of their artful enemy, entailed the imperfection of human nature on all mankind.

The descendants of Adam gave still more signal proofs of their free-agency; for they not only transgressed the known law of God, but even preferred the worship of Idols to His service. And this part of history, it might be imagined, would afford a sufficient argument against the assertions of those who represent God as an arbitrary tyrant, and man as a being acted upon by an irresistible force: since it must be the most glaring contradiction and absurdity to suppose that God should command obedience to His laws, and at the same time influence the minds of men to disobey them in the grossest manner, by worshipping other gods in opposition to Him, even the work of their own hands.

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But, beside the external proofs of man's free-will, arising from the examples of the abuse of it, recorded in Holy Writ, there is an internal proof of it in every man's own breast. The human mind has a clear perception of its own free-agency ; and is sensible of a power of choice, in spite of the pains which some have taken to argue themselves out of their very senses ; and it appears to me that the mind, were it a slave, would be just as sensible of the privation of its free powers, as the body is, when manacled and fettered, and thrown into prison. Of this matter of fact we might receive ample testimony from those who, in certain circumstances of life, have heartily willed one thing, but, from various considerations, have found themselves obliged to do another.

Such was the freedom which Man originally received from his Maker : but it was a freedom adapted to human nature ; perfect, uncontrollable liberty being the prerogative of that God alone, who possesses infinite wisdom and goodness, as well as absolute power.

C

Liberty

Liberty was not to be exercised by Man, beyond a certain point, with impunity : it was bounded by the law of his Creator, and the penalty of the transgression of that law was his certain destruction : The original rights of man therefore (if I may so express myself) with respect to his freedom, as established by God, could only be exerted with safety in a strict obedience to God's appointed service.

Nor do we find that the Jews, that chosen nation, were indulged by their Almighty Law-giver with a greater extent of liberty. Their obedience to the laws of God, as made known to them through Moses, was so strictly required, that he was accursed who should dare to deviate from it; and the wages of sin still continued, as under God's original Dispensation, to be death.

2. Let us now advert to the nature of that Freedom proclaimed to mankind by the Gospel of Christ.

The great and glorious Liberty, proclaimed to mankind by the Gospel of Christ, was a
 freedom

freedom from the dominion of sin, and it's consequent, death. Christ by his death destroyed the body of sin, that those, who die with him, should no longer be slaves to it; and by his resurrection, he ensured to all his faithful followers a conquest over the power of the grave, and an admission into the eternal joys of Heaven. Our Saviour also, at his departure out of this world, promised to his disciples the assistance of the Holy Ghost, to strengthen them in their conflicts with the tyranny of sin, and to guide them into all truth.

Christ likewise hath delivered us from all those tedious and burthenfome ceremonies which had been enjoined to the Jews, and which were only the * “ shadows of good things to come.” † He blotted out the hand-writing of ordinances that was against us, and nailed it to his cross: and Christians are therefore exhorted to ‡ stand fast in the liberty wherewith Christ has made them free, and not to be entangled again with the yoke of bondage.

With

* Clo. ii. 17. & Heb. x. 1.

† Col. ii. 14.

‡ Gal. v. 1.

With such transcendent privileges, it was natural that the first Christians, receiving their freedom from the Apostles, who had been miraculously commissioned by their Lord, should feel themselves most highly favoured: nor is it matter of wonder that, in their first transports, they should lose sight of all earthly considerations, and vow obedience to God their Saviour alone, who had so justly merited their rightful service. It became therefore the business of those, to whom Christ had committed the publication of his Gospel, to moderate those transports, to shew them the proper use of their distinguished privileges, to remind them of the relative duties of their respective situations in this world, and to ascertain the precise standard of their liberty. This is the object of St. Peter's first Epistle, where, after having dwelt upon the very peculiar advantages of the Jewish Nation, he suggests to them, that all those advantages did not exempt them from any one obligation of the Moral Law, or the principles of Natural Religion, which had been again published,

lished, with the highest authority, in the Gospel. He exhorts them to be * sober, and obedient children, and, after Christ, holy in all manner of conversation, that † God may be glorified by their good works.

The precept contained in the text evidently refers to their behaviour under those Governments, whose protection they severally enjoyed. In truth, Obedience to Governors is founded on the strongest of all authorities, even the example of our blessed Saviour Himself. He, who was Omnipotent, could, at a word, if He had so willed it, have new-modeled the form of every Government upon earth, and suppled the hearts of all mankind to obey the everlasting laws of righteousness and truth. But such an exertion of his power would have defeated the ends of his infinite wisdom: and our Lord did not chuse to interfere, either in word or deed, with the Powers under which he lived, even with the arbitrary Government of Rome.

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He

* 1st Ep. Peter. i. 13, 14, 15.

† 1st Ep. Peter. ii. 12.

He acknowledged the propriety of paying* tribute unto Cæsar ; and, at the last, though he could have commanded legions of Angels to chastise his enemies, he patiently submitted to the death of a slave and malefactor ; and taught his disciples a truth, which many would do well to remember, that the Kingdom of their Redeemer is not of this world.† Lowliness, meekness, peace, and long-suffering, are among the first virtues recommended to us by Jesus Christ ; and Christians are commanded to hold forth a bright example of these graces to the rest of the world. Whence we may learn, that, how much soever Christians may rejoice in their liberty, and glory that the Son of God Himself has made them free, yet that they must be sober-minded, gentle, and peaceable, in every relation wherein they stand. If, actuated by this disposition, we earnestly pray for the pure gift of God's Holy Spirit, to deliver our mind from that worst of all slaveries, the slavery of our tyrannical lusts, the Heavenly
Grace

* Matt. xxii. 21.

† John. xviii. 36.

Grace will assist us in the work, and be sufficient to set us free ; the principles of the Gospel will have their full effect upon our hearts, and * where the Spirit of the Lord is, there, and there alone, will be true liberty. Such liberty will enable us to judge clearly of social freedom ; and to consider the nature of all human government, without the bias of ambition or envy, of pride or malice. If every man will first examine his own heart, and try the purity of that source with impartiality, he will there find much imperfection, and be led to remember, with profound humility, that the best of all human devices can never, from it's nature, be entirely free from defect ; and that it must every day be liable to become more imperfect. But it is the indispensable duty of all Christians to bring no discredit on the holiness of their Profession by any act of misbehaviour, whereby the enemies of the Gospel may take occasion to triumph over them.

They indeed will not be easily induced to contend against the order of society, who
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have first established order in their own minds; nor will they, who enjoy the true liberty of the Gospel, (a freedom from the power of sin) wish to violate or change wholesome laws, or to make any other use of their liberty, than that which they are entitled to as the servants of God: and this limitation is pointed out by the Apostle, to regulate our notions and desires of Liberty, as members of Society.

Now the rule here laid down applies to all those members of society, under every Government, who own allegiance to God: because obedience to His laws ought, in all cases, to supersede every other consideration. But it applies with peculiar force to those who enjoy the benefit of a Christian Establishment, and expect a more exalted share of glory in the Kingdom of their Master, if in this world they are persecuted for righteousness sake. Under a mild and well-regulated Government it should seem that the advice of the Apostle might be most readily attended to, since the laws of such a Constitution must

must, in general at least, be founded on the laws of God ; and Governors, as far as they enforce the laws of wisdom, justice, and goodness, are, under every form of Government, the Ministers of God, inasmuch as they promote the ends of God's moral Government on earth. As far therefore as they promote these ends, we can have no liberty to resist their power, since in obeying them, we obey God. It is true indeed, as has been suggested, that human laws must necessarily partake of the imperfection of the human understanding: in estimating therefore their goodness, as also the degree of liberty to be expected under them, we must always carry in our thoughts the present state of human nature. We must consider men as they really are ; not as endowed with that perfection in which Adam originally came from the hands of his Maker, but, as the Christian Religion supposes them, in a fallen and degenerate state. Were human nature subject to no imperfections, there would be no occasion for any sort of restraint. Mutual benevolence and love would be the fulfilling of

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the law of God, and human laws would be unnecessary for the regulation of Society. But the case is far otherwise. Experience shews us the general corruption of mankind, and teaches us, how often the greatest blessings are abused, and made subservient to the most wicked purposes. The passions, which God hath implanted in us for the most noble ends, are often so perverted as to be instrumental to the accomplishment of the worst. To call the uncontrolled indulgence of these passions *Liberty*, and to murmur against those wise laws, which secure us against the madness of each other, is surely a prostitution of our reason. For right reason would lead us, by it's just judgment, to our good; and, by controlling the passions, direct them to their proper ends. If, in opposition to this director, which God hath given us, if, in contradiction to the impulse of His Holy Spirit, if, regardless of our true liberty, we prefer the slavery of our lusts; or, from a fatal enthusiasm, imagine that the freedom proclaimed to us by the Gospel absolves us from

from the duties of social life, we must not wonder if human laws positively declare to us, Thus far thou shalt go, but no farther. Modern Theorists have yet to learn, that the true use of every blessing is found in Moderation. A freedom from *all* restraint was never intended for Man by the Deity ; it does not belong to him as a member of Society ; and is known only to the fierce and savage beast of the forest, who is a terror to all around him, and whom every one contributes his endeavours to destroy.

We, my Brethren, may rejoice that our Civil Liberty is not alone secured to us by the laws of our wise Constitution, but that we enjoy in the greatest fullness the free exercise of our most holy Religion. The light of the Gospel sheds it's cheering beams in this kingdom, and shews the beauty of Christianity in it's true and genuine colours. If one mode of Divine Worship is thought worthy to be established in preference to others, (and that country must be truly miserable where there is no established Religion) yet private judgment

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ment is left to decide for itself without interruption, and to answer to God alone, as is reasonable, for it's decisions. It never becomes responsible to Society but when it's mistakes prove injurious to social peace and welfare, by inducing men to transgress it's settled laws; when liberty is used for a cloke of maliciousness, and men would secretly undermine, or avowedly overturn those very bulwarks, by which society itself is defended and secured. That same principle which can hurry men on to attempt the subversion of a well-constituted establishment, and introduce the miseries of anarchy, must, from it's violence, impel them to deprive others of the blessings of Toleration and Liberty, should they muster strength enough to enforce their own maxims as the basis of a general Religion.

Those who know their true happiness and liberty will praise the Lord for his present mercies, and use the Divine blessings as becometh the servants of God.

With

With this religious regard, all the gifts of God, all the talents committed by Him to our care, are to be considered and improved. When we reflect on the infinite wisdom and goodness of our Creator, we shall immediately have a proper sense of our own ignorance and unworthiness, and we shall begin to wonder that God has bestowed so much upon us, instead of repining that He has not given us more. We shall be led to study the proper use of those gifts, lest, by abusing them, we provoke Him to take them away from us, and confer them on those who deserve them better.

The abuse of Civil Liberty springs from an unprincipled and licentious spirit. Hence arise impatience of due control, and the destruction of wholesome power, closely followed by confusion and every evil work. This wretched and insupportable state always calls for the most violent remedies; and oftentimes induces men to seek that protection from the arbitrary power of *one*, which they have in vain looked for under the confederate tyrannies of *many* masters.

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The abuse of Religious advantages arises from pride, presumption, selfishness, and vain-glory. These vices discover themselves in a malicious contempt of others, and in a furious and mistaken zeal; a zeal without knowledge of the principles of the Gospel; a zeal which has occasioned the most barbarous and cruel persecutions in former times, and brought the Professors of our most holy Religion to the lowest disgrace; inasmuch as they have trampled under foot that Royal Law of Charity, which is the proof of our love of God, and the leading characteristic of the disciples of Christ.

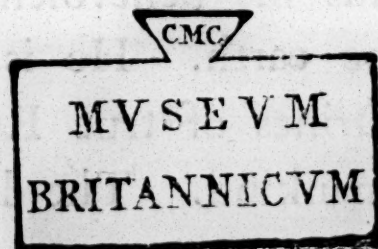
Far different is the behaviour of the true servants of God. They wish not to violate His commandments, nor transgress the laws of a well-ordered Government. They look up to those who are in authority over them, not indeed with the abject fear of slaves, but with a love and reverence due from the sons of Freedom to the Guardians of their sacred laws; laws, which their innocence forbids them to fear, whilst they follow the advice
of

of St. Paul to the Romans— * “ Wilt thou not be afraid of the Power? do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same: for Rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil.” They are well-affected towards their fellow citizens with brotherly love; they consider them as governed by the same laws; as having one and the same interest; as under the ties of the same Religion; and as members of the same spiritual body, whose Head is Christ. These sentiments are proved by an unfeigned and universal Charity, the very bond of peace and of all social virtues.

Actuated by these principles, the servant of God extends his benevolence to all the Nations of the earth. He is zealous that the sound doctrines of true Religion should influence all mankind. The liberty, which he enjoys, does not prompt him to despise those who reject the same advantages, but to pity them, and endeavour, by gentle persuasion and prevailing example, to lead them
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* Rom. xiii. 3.

into the right path of duty. By adhering to the laws of his God, he fulfills the public and private duties of his station, as far as human imperfection will permit, with steadiness and perseverance ; he is a faithful Subject, a good Man, a sincere Christian. The Freedom derived to him from his Nature, his Country, and his Religion, he enjoys, with decent humility, and gratitude to the Author of every good gift ; ever mindful of this most important Truth—that NO SORT OF LIBERTY CAN ABSOLVE HIM FROM HIS OBEDIENCE TO GOD : or, in other words, that OBEDIENCE TO GOD IS THE JUST MEASURE OF ALL HUMAN LIBERTY.



F I N I S.

